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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: RELIGIOUS LEADERS FACE OBSTACLES
HELPING IDPS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On November 23, international and Sri Lankan religious leaders held a conference in Anuradhapura at which they sought to facilitate the opening of a humanitarian corridor for the IDP population of the Vanni. Following the conference they met with the President who offered his encouragement for their efforts. However, despite this, the organizer of the conference reported that the religious leaders, particularly the senior Buddhist priests who participated lack real enthusiasm for this initiative, and efforts to travel to the Vanni to engage the LTTE are stalled. The President remains committed to a military solution to the conflict and is unlikely to engage in real negotiations with the LTTE while Prabhakaran remains in charge. Many influential Buddhist monks support the President's policy, which will continue to hamper efforts to develop a religious leader consensus to support peace efforts. End Summary

Religious Leaders Agree to
Pursue Ways to Help IDPs

¶2. (U) On November 23 international religious leaders joined senior Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian leaders from the North, East and South of Sri Lanka in Anuradhapura for a conference hosted by the Inter-religious Council of Sri Lanka and its affiliate the National Peace Council. The participants of the conference focused on ways they could help alleviate the suffering of the internally displaced population of the Vanni and committed to explore humanitarian initiatives to establish corridors of movement and safety zones for the affected people of the North.

President Welcomes Initiative

¶3. (C) Following the conference the participants met separately with Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremasinghe, Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa and President Rajapaksa. National Peace Council Director Jehan Perera characterized Wickremasinghe's attitude as dismissive to the religious leaders' presentation of their ideas for a humanitarian corridor. The UNP leader argued that there was nowhere for the IDPs to go if they did leave the Vanni and that the LTTE would not let the IDPs leave anyway. Perera did report that both Basil Rajapaksa and the President were more welcoming and open to the idea of the group reaching out to the LTTE to

see if they could travel to the Vanni to discuss a humanitarian corridor. However, the President indicated that only Sri Lankan citizens would be permitted to embark on such a trip.

Buddhist Priests Not That Motivated

¶4. (C) Despite the encouraging words from the President, Perera reported that the whole initiative was plagued by problems. The Sri Lankan religious leaders, particularly the senior Buddhist monks who participated, lacked initiative and the conference as well as the humanitarian proposals were being driven by the NGO community with the Buddhist clergy reluctantly going along. In fact, Perera reported that it took the intervention of Kinglsey Rodrigo, the head of the election monitoring group PAFFREL, who has well known ties to the Rajapaksas to convince the monks to attend the conference. At the conference these priests were the only ones to characterize the situation as a "terrorist problem" while the other participants addressed the ethnic nature of the conflict.

Trip to Vanni On Hold

¶5. (C) While Perera was eager to leverage the President's blessing and move forward on a trip to the Vanni, he felt that Rodrigo, because of his close ties to the President and his brothers, would need to take an active part in any trip to the North, if the group were to get expedited clearances from the Ministry of Defense and convince the Buddhist clergy to accompany the group. However, Rodrigo, according to Perera was not eager to leave anytime soon. With immediate plans to travel to the Vanni on hold, Perera is looking to a mid-January trip to Oslo with a core group of the religious leaders. He's hoping that their time in Norway can be used to build camaraderie amongst the participants and energize the group to show more initiative.

Comment

¶6. (C) The National Peace Council has diligently worked to engage different elements within Sri Lankan society as well as the Diaspora community to help facilitate a dialogue on peace. Engaging religious leaders is potentially useful, particularly the Buddhist monks who enjoy considerable influence among the President's Sinhalese political base in the south. However, many monks, including the monk-based JHU party, are among the strongest supporters of a military solution, which explains the half-hearted support they gave to the NPC effort. Perera recounted that the President in a private aside to him during the religious leaders' meeting had said that the military just "needed to finish off" the LTTE. Perera assessed that the government's top priority, even more than retaking the whole of the Vanni, was to kill the LTTE leadership. Presidential advisor and pollster Sunimal Fernando, in a separate meeting echoed those sentiments doubting that the President would engage in constructive dialogue with the LTTE as long as Prabhakaran remained alive. Perera assessed that it would be a slow grind for both sides in the near term and said peace was not on the horizon for at least six to 12 months. Post will continue to engage with local and international actors seeking to address the humanitarian situation and working to open a dialogue that might lead to a political solution between the parties in the future. End Comment.

Blake